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Values, autonomy and well-being: implications for learning and teaching in physical education

Abstract

The paper focuses on the possibilities for physical education as an effective policy conduit and constructive contributor to the type of life-affirming values which are widely endorsed. After a critical review of recent well-being theorizing, ideas on how values central to physical education and well-being could be coherently conceptualized are advanced. Underpinning discussion is a focus on merging subjective and objective character traits in ways which recognise the importance of pupil autonomy, time for reflection and respect for others. This is followed by a review of how such values could inform learning arrangements, where there is an added emphasis on dialogue and shared discussion, and strategies which use language to help make pupils reasoning more explicit. The paper concludes by highlighting how clarity on subject values coupled with pedagogical changes could help physical education articulate its benefits better during a time of heightened policy expectancy.

Keywords: Values, Autonomy, Well-being, Physical Education, Learning, Teaching

Introduction

Accompanying the competition, celebration and theatre of the London 2012 Olympic Games was associated discussion on how the games could provide lasting legacy benefits for the host nation. Many high level politicians in the United Kingdom took the opportunity to advance their views on related matters. Thus, for a time there was heightened media attention on the unhelpfulness of selling off school playing fields (as urban expansion continued to place a premium of land becoming available for new buildings). There was also concern about whether certain types of activities (e.g., Indian dance) were substantive enough, relative to competitive team sports, to count towards achieving national curriculum activity time targets for active participation in secondary school programmes (for pupils of 12-18 years). The terms ‘sport’, ‘health’ and ‘education’ tended to be the favoured lexicon of the legacy debate on addressing wider health and sport concerns, with mention of ‘physical education’ being used much more sparingly. This might cause unease for physical educationalists, as there has regularly been some dubiety about the contribution of school-based programmes (Kirk, 2010), even though the subject is often framed as the main policy conduit around which improvements in physically active lifestyles and personal well-being can take place (see, for example, Scottish Executive, 2004). However, such opportunities might not last indefinitely and this matter is complicated further by the tendency of policy nowadays to pronounce on aspirations and outcomes with very little elaboration of the in-between details of values and curriculum content (Priestley & Biesta, 2013). This makes it necessary for those interested in the future of physical education to consider in greater detail what closer integration between physical education and well-being might mean for learning and teaching, and of how specifically pupils’ values can connect with their current needs and perceived longer terms goals.

From the perspective of this paper, it is considered highly desirable that physical education demonstrates its contribution to the type of life-affirming and stable well-being values which are widely endorsed in academic literature (Tiberius, 2008; Raibley, 2010). Progress in these ways

could help improve the subject connections and commitment towards achieving multiple learning benefits. It would help, for example, in articulating with the Australian curriculum proposals for health and physical education (Australian Curriculum Assessment and Reporting Authority, 2012, p. 16) where there is an expectation that pupils of 14-16 years are able to ‘maintain a positive outlook on their world and to learn strategies to assist in taking control of their future’ and develop ‘self-talk, goal-setting, perseverance and optimistic thinking.’

Values and physical education

The analytical philosophical traditions of the 1960s and 1970s, which characterised the importance of a liberal education almost entirely in terms of academic or theoretical understanding (relative to practical forms of learning), tended to place physical education in a tricky and defensively-inclined position (Thorburn, 2010a). Physical education was not readily among Peters’s (1966) modes of understanding or the subject columns which derived from Hirst’s (1974) forms of knowledge. Peters (1966, p. 159) considered games to be non-serious and morally unimportant as they lack ‘a wide ranging cognitive content’ based as they are on mere know-how. By contrast, other disciplines such as science or philosophy contain limitless potential for increasing knowledge and for making discerning judgments (Peters, 1966). Over time, Peters and Hirst modified their views in ways which would afford greater promise for physical education. Peters (1983) later clarified that his concept of education was too specific and lacked a full enough account of worthwhile activities, while Hirst’s (1993, p. 197) updated social practices view recognized that the ‘main error in my (original) position was seeing theoretical knowledge as the logical foundation for the development of sound practical knowledge and rational personal development.’ In addition, Peters (1972) underappreciated the difficulties (conceptual and practical) of expecting that pupils would be interested in learning activities across all modes of understanding. As White (2010, p. 126) succinctly notes ‘psychologically, this is asking a lot of them’ as only voluntary engagement with worthwhile activities can lead to flourishing. However, from a physical education perspective, the

effects of Peters's and Hirst's original writings created a legacy of their own; as the subject went to great lengths to argue that with some careful adjustment it could be an academic subject (Thorburn, 2010a). In Scotland, new examinations awards with a premium on critical thinking were rolled out for pupils (age 14-18 years) in the middle and upper stages of secondary schooling from the 1980s onwards. The consuming nature of this task tended to lead to difficulties in addressing other subject priorities quickly enough and of recognizing the increased societal interest there now is in health and wellbeing e.g., as evident by government interest in Scotland (and across the United Kingdom more widely) in lowering preventative health costs and promoting high levels of sporting participation (Thorburn, 2010b). Accordingly, there is now an expectation that teachers can play a much more proactive role in designing meaningful experiences which provide pupils with the opportunity to reflect on their well-being and the lives they lead (Scottish Executive, 2004).

However, the ways in which feelings, thoughts and impressions can have a special relationship and value for each pupil have often remained rather vague and poorly considered to date (Thorburn, Jess & Atencio, 2011). Recent related theorizing is only of limited use as well. For example, Bloodworth, McNamee and Bailey (2011) have developed, in embryonic terms, an objectivist-informed account of well-being where more equitable sport and physical activity opportunities could help people to thrive. The authors contend that self-reflection informed subjective theories of well-being are unsatisfactory as they offer little more than enjoyment-related experiences as a justification for engaging in activity and that narrowly drawn objective influences e.g., meeting participation targets are also flawed. The authors propose instead that a more general evaluative and critical space be found for contemplating sport, physical activity and well-being gains. While this might appear quite viable a problem is that sport and physical activity are only considered to offer very particular benefits and are not 'vanilla means to a general sort of capability or functioning, but represent specific ways in which we might realize capabilities' (Bloodworth et al., 2011, p. 15). Making a virtue out of lack of generalizability might be possible in sport and physical activity

contexts, but it would be much less useful in physical education, where clear connections with whole school aims and societal ambitions are expected.

Teasing out connections between physical education and personal growth seem more plausibly underway in Australia (ACARA, 2012). Three out of the ten educationalists involved on the Health and Physical Education Advisory Group developing a national curriculum for schools were professors of education or child and adolescent health. In addition, an extensive range of academic readings informed the draft guidelines (ACARA, 2012). These advocate the adoption of a strength-based approach to physical education where the cultivation of positive attitudes is championed relative to the continuation of a risk-based approach with its negative connotations of needing to change for the better certain health-related behaviours. This approach appears to have some immediate advantages; firstly, it can help physical education define more constructively its fundamental aims and purposes. In so doing, it can outline how it represents more than a corrective for a plethora of societal ills, and is a subject instead which uses a foundation of positive experiences as the basis for cultivating voluntary and enthusiastic participation habits. Secondly, it indicates the possibilities which might exist if physical education can progress beyond the sharp intrinsic vs. instrumental distinctions which have so often characterised thinking in recent years e.g., of whether it should be the intrinsic goods associated with participation which are emphasised most (Hawkins, 2008) or whether instrumental arguments which emphasize how higher levels of physical activity could help lower social welfare costs should be favoured (Naylor and McKay, 2009).

Values, autonomy and well-being

Similar dichotomies are also evident in well-being more generally e.g., in terms of whether subjective (intrinsic) theories associated with individual happiness and life satisfaction should be valued most (Sumner, 1996), or whether more objective (instrumental) measurements of

comparative knowledge and achievement gains should be preferred (Cuypers, 2012). One main difficulty with such polarized views is where paradigmatically to draw the line between the two. Tiberius (2012) advocates that ‘right in the middle’ would be the best place to develop theorizing on how to fulfill one’s values. The possibilities of such an enterprise for physical education are considered a little later. However, for the present, the focus is on clarifying the main points which influence subjective theories of well-being and contrasting these with arguments from a more idealized (objective) perspective. These distinctions matter as they reveal contrasting conceptions of how values are shaped and informed (Pritchard, 2005). The main challenge for subjective theories of well-being is to elaborate on how beliefs and enjoyment can provide an account of values and worthwhileness, which is more convincing than one merely associated with satisfying individual needs and preferences. Dewey (1929) highlighted as much many years ago, when noting that it needs to be possible to distinguish between the simpler subject states of enjoyment and desire with reflections which can generate stable and caring judgements. By contrast, the main difficulty with more idealized theories such as rational desire satisfaction theories (Raibley, 2010) is that there might be too big a gap between a person’s internal values and those they aspire towards or which are set for them as objectives. The difficulty is that if values require a human evaluation component for explanatory purposes then they may not be objective as in some instances knowledge acquisition can be ‘a completely unreflective matter’ (Pritchard, 2005, p. 239). Tiberius (2012, p. 2) summarizes the dilemma as follows: ‘simple subjectivism captures internalism but loses normativity; idealized subjectivism captures normativity, but loses internalism’.

Sumner (1996), in trying to reconcile these differences argues that providing individuals with autonomy can afford the endorsement necessary for connecting life satisfaction with welfare values. Tiberius (2008) in progressing with this line of thinking advocates the merits of utilizing a first person perspective on experience which can connect with normative decision-making on how to make good choices. Making such connections, it is argued, is possible and necessary as well-being

values are inescapably normative and value-laden (Tiberius, 2008). Thus, philosophically, discussions on values are different from psychological informed reviews of values where measurement relative to statistical (list) metrics is considered viable. This is one main reason why Tiberius's (2008) work has been utilized in this paper, as she is one of the relatively few authors who have deliberately sought to draw upon both moral philosophy and positive psychology influences in teasing out values which contain substantive reason-giving character traits. The concept of well-being developed by Tiberius (2008) is informed by a mix of Aristotelian, Humean and phenomenological insights and argues for more than the pursuit of pleasure and instead for thicker notions like human flourishing or well-being to be cultivated. Aristotle's eudaimonism (human flourishing) contains similar subjective and objective components; a subjective component which recognizes what individuals desire e.g., the feeling of being engrossed in experiences which engage fully our skills, interests and capacities and an objective component which reflects a societal interest with what individuals want e.g., in terms of positive psychological functioning and cultivating good relations with others. This mix appreciates the virtues people continue to endorse as being fulfilling as well as the changing influences on society e.g., the need for individuals to take on a more constructive attitude towards physical exercise and for managing their health in general.

Raibley (2010) considers that individual agency can overtake subjective self-assessment concerns that accounts of values lack the cognitive basis to make them objective and measurable. Raibley (2010) proposes that appreciating better the fine line there often is between activities being of value and being of harm is key to making stable judgements, as it involves learners reviewing non-actual as well as actual situations. In so doing, his theorizing overcomes some of the limitations of self-assessment theories e.g., Sumner (1996) where the person is considered the final authority on their own well-being. Instead, Raibley (2010) argues, that people should be invited to critically engage with experiences and discern the 'best' way forward following critical reflection and practical reasoning. In educational contexts, such properly developed experiences should entice and perplex

learners as they would require cognitive resources to help construct coherent meanings and to reflect critically. In short, pupils would be invited into a practice that helped cultivate informed and stable values. Pedagogically, (as will be elaborated on more fully later) this is a demanding remit for teachers, as it involves adopting a mix of teaching approaches: at times providing the reassurance and clarity sought by pupils and on other occasions using more disruptive methods to challenge pupils existing assumptions and existing values (Thorburn & Marshall, 2011).

For the present it is cultivating stable values which are key to the aforementioned ‘right in the middle’ critique, as Tiberius (2012, p. 16) is aware that with public policy ‘policymakers should look for values that are widely shared and highly stable’. Making progress on these matters involves reviewing the nature of values, issues to do with reflection and authenticity as well as considering the adequacy criteria which might inform thinking on normativity measures. Such a focus might lessen concerns that the nurturing of practical wisdom is something which can only be reviewed over a full life and not over shorter spaces of time. Regarding the nature of values, Tiberius’s (2008) concern with the rather limited reasoning powers of people has led her to tease out four values which contain substantive reason-giving character traits (namely, attention flexibility, perspective, optimism and self-awareness). Attention flexibility helps you to discover the passions which capture your initial interest prior to reflecting on their influence on your values. Perspective is needed so that you can review your plans in a measured way and redefine your thoughts and actions in line with your values. Moderate self-awareness helps you to review plans and make decisions which fit in with your interests, abilities and values. This can help avoid unhelpful self-absorption and over-analysis. Realistic optimism helps you to live a life which is better from your point of view, but also one which appreciates the moral benefits of being good to others. Overall, Tiberius (2008) considers that these four values are capable of supporting reflection, are realistic to achieve and endorsed by most people.

According to Tiberius (2012) whether values contain the necessary blend of subjective and objective coherence is dependent on whether values are adequately informed by reflection and authenticity. This involves reviewing whether values suit us emotionally, as engagement with longer term goals requires motivation, and whether values are compatible with our personal ideals. Thus, the criteria relationship between well-being and the well-being subject includes a mix of influences - subjective elements such as ordinary matters we care about as well as normative measures connected with life satisfaction, relationship satisfaction and meaningfulness goals. Importantly, normative measures should not be so hyper-idealized that they limit motivational engagement or are so detached that they become unrealistic to achieve. By aiming for a theory which is 'right in the middle', Tiberius's (2012) intention is that her thinking can help people make coherent and effective decisions about their lives. Haybron and Tiberius (2012, p. 2) refer to this type of aspiration as a form of 'pragmatic subjectivism', as it is founded on widely agreed principles of respecting persons and on personal welfare values.

Furthermore, such philosophical theorizing on individual values appears coherent with more established notions of social learning arrangements, where the interaction of engagement, imagination and alignment is judged pivotal to developing a sense of belonging (Wenger, 2000). Highlighting the potential for learning to be considered as an 'interplay between social competence and personal experience' (Wenger, 2000, p. 227) bodes well for physical education given the practice contexts within which pupils can be provided with opportunities to pinpoint and review their personal identities in relation to other members of their community (Kirk & Macdonald, 1998). Consequently, as it is widely considered that moving towards full participation in communities of practices requires active engagement 'in the construction of knowledge through meaningful social activity' (Kirk & Macdonald, 1998, p. 381), there is merit in reviewing how such constructive ambitions could be progressed in physical education.

Learning and teaching in physical education

In taking matters forward, the onus is for physical educationalists to identify how to cultivate stable values, which are informed by experience and reflection and which can articulate with pupils' current needs and perceived longer terms goals. On this basis, values adopted can connect feasibly with subjective measures such as pleasure and with normative measures (e.g., relationship satisfaction and meaningfulness), so that reflections are authentic i.e., relevant and accurate. However, complicating such aspirations are school arrangements where continually extending the choice of practical activities available (e.g. by introducing new sports to the curriculum) is the main device used to try and maintain pupils interest (Kirk, 2010). There seem good grounds therefore for considering that greater changes to such a perspective on learning and teaching are needed. These could be predicated on teachers harnessing their knowledge of practical activities to design more substantive learning contexts that enable pupils to build up voluntary participation habits and increased opportunities to discuss and review their attitudes and decision-making towards physical education and personal well-being. In such settings, teachers would take active pedagogical steps e.g., using strategic questions and facilitative discussion to help pupils link their previous experiences to their future participation plans. This would typically include inviting pupils to critically reflect on their experiences and to discuss what they regard as worthwhile participation habits, and the extent to which they are satisfied with the choices they have made and the goals they have set thus far (Thorburn & MacAllister, in press).

However, as noted earlier, it is appreciated that the pursuit of these types of ambitions can place teachers in something of a pedagogical bind, especially if some pupils choose to make decisions which do not readily recognize the intended positive connections between regular voluntary engagement in physical education and an enhanced sense of personal well-being. These types of situations might emerge if pupils report that they are comfortable with their choice to lower their participation levels or remain with the activity choice made, even if this is proving relatively

unrewarding. These examples match psychology findings which indicate that people can often try to rationalize their poor decisions in order to avoid a state of cognitive dissonance (Snibbe & Markus, 2005). Thus, while in some instances inviting pupils to view situations and experiences afresh could prove a constructive use of teacher time, it is nevertheless appreciated that teachers may need to recognize, and to some extent wrestle with, the normative values framework which underpins their professional role. Therefore, it is appreciated that what is being outlined contains a mix of what Biesta (2013, p. 1) terms engaging with ‘the beautiful risk of education’ coupled with an encouragement for teachers to appreciate that their sincerity in speaking with pupils on such matters may well be reciprocated by pupils sense of being good to others (realistic optimism) (Tiberius, 2008).

Making pedagogical progress in these types of situations would also connect with White’s (2011, p. 60) view that ‘personal autonomy is for nearly all of us, an inalienable component of our well-being’ and by MacAllister’s (2013) concern that to be physically educated requires pupils to habitually participate in physical activities which promote their flourishing. It would also link with Haji and Cuypers’s (2008, p.85) wider theorizing which considers that there is an ‘essential association between the autonomy of our springs of action, such as desires and beliefs, on the one hand, and personal well-being, on the other.’ Establishing such viable connections might partially overtake some of the concerns of White (2002) has mentioned about the difficulty there might be in building a strong connection between personal welfare and autonomy.

In addition, crucial to future claims for curriculum worthiness is generating evidence that physical education and well-being learning gains can be reviewed in clear and educationally reliable ways. This would help address concerns that Barrow (2010, p.18) has raised about needing to distinguish between education and training, as we would not ‘classify a person with an esoteric set of skills, regardless of how much we admired them, as educated on that account alone’. This distinction

might serve to further limit the educational potential of sport and certain physical activity agendas, especially if pursued in line with the objective reasoning arguments advanced by Bloodworth et al. (2011) where lack of generalizability is seen as advantageous rather than a limitation. To avoid the pitfalls of overly pursuing activity skills which are limited in terms of the transferable educational benefit there is a need for pupils' thinking to be autonomous and regulated by programme arrangements which value time and attention being made available for reflection and reviews of decision making. As such, dialogue and shared discussions between teachers and pupils and among small groups of pupils should help to ensure that deliberations on subject experiences are a natural and integrated component part of pupils' school life in relation to the types of stable values being more widely cultivated (Tiberius, 2008). However, as noted earlier, sharing discussion time with pupils can be a demanding remit for teachers as they need to mediate between trying to value pupils' autonomy while also avoiding the imposition of set values (and set decision-making) which can limit pupils' engagement with the discussion process.

Nevertheless, working towards these ambitions should lessen the problems of narrow instrumentalism, whereby pupils are presented with, for example, inert risk-based health evidence about which it is difficult to actively engage with and reflect upon. In this respect, the theorizing of Raibley (2010) is helpful, as it contains the basis for conceptualizing learning and teaching as both a personalized and cognitively informed exercise. Thus, problematic issues surrounding physical education more widely (e.g., substance misuse and cheating in sport and fanaticism towards completing exercise programmes) can be investigated and discussed in context rather than ignored altogether or marginalized by the imposition of overly restrictive and un-substantive self-review approaches (Barrow, 2008). Such thinking is consistent with Bassey's (2010) views on the merits of creating learning environments where pupils are challenged to reflect and think critically. It is also consistent with MacPhail and Halbert's (2010) evidence from physical education that pupils were

positive about discussing their learning intentions with other pupils and teachers, and of having more involvement in evaluating and recording their progress.

One stumbling block in making further progress could be the reluctance in some quarters (see, for example, Reid, 1996) to use language to review movement-informed learning gains. However, it is doubtful if reviews of learning by more specific forms of communication are necessary and/or possible. For, as Barrow (2008) notes, such claims might limit curriculum possibilities, as they would fail to appreciate the benefits of verbal communication in developing and demonstrating a detailed understanding of experience and knowledge. Barrow (2008, p. 281) highlights the difficulties to hand by noting that if activities such as dance are to define themselves by being a unique communication medium then dancers are 'going to have to dance the argument out'. This is problematic, as on this basis 'we are doomed forever to fail to understand the argument if we are not dancers' (Barrow, 2008, p. 281). Arnold (1979) somewhat reluctantly agrees the same point when outlining his ideas on meaning and movement in sport and physical education. He commented that 'language and the scope it offers must remain the only way forward' provided language does not become a substitute for movement (Arnold, 1979, p. xiii). His views reflect Hirst's (1993, p. 186) note that language is a 'necessary key to the development of reason and rational living'.

On this basis, there seem possibilities in building on Brinkmann's (2007) advocacy of a more substantive and explicit practical reasoning approach. This possibility exists as Brinkmann (2007) considers that the form of positioning theory he advances is an effective practical tool for helping people to make reasonable and discerning decisions when developing their social relationships with others. And, while Brinkmann (2007) argues that it is only possible to provide general rules of thumb on these matters, there do appear to be strong connections with recent agendas in physical education which are geared towards helping pupils to take on a more active role in the design of their curriculum experiences. For example, Enright and O'Sullivan (2010) have shown that

negotiating curriculum with teenage girls can promote meaningful engagement, especially when there is sufficient recognition of the sensitivity of gendered identities and of the often destructive relationships with their bodies which some girls can have. Accordingly, co-constructed and negotiated curriculum experiences might provide the opportunity for experiential learning opportunities to dovetail with the acquisition of knowledge (of skills, fitness, training and healthy living) in ways which can equip pupils with the habits, skills and capacities to continue to make more informed and educationally rounded well-being decisions in future years.

Conclusion

This paper has sought to review how values central to physical education and well-being could be coherently conceptualized and thereafter how learning and teaching could be organised and reviewed. These questions have been raised against a backdrop of increased expectation that greater sport-related active participation gains through physical education could contribute towards fulfilling Olympic legacy ambitions in the United Kingdom. In seeking to reconcile subjective vs. objective dilemmas, there is an attractiveness in applying Tiberius's (2012) 'right in the middle' theorising on cultivating stable values, as they provide regulative ideas which can inform reflection and decision making. For such ideas to impact on learning practice in schools would often require substantial pedagogical change. In this paper it has been argued that a more constructive use of dialogue and language in reviewing learning gains could help ensure that physical education is more feasibly aligned with the revised analytical views of Hirst (1993, p. 197) who recognized 'the priority of personal knowledge by initiation into a complex of specific, substantive social practices with all the knowledge, attitudes, feelings, virtues, skills, dispositions and relationships that that involves.' Making such changes could also encourage teachers to review physical education's connections with well-being values and to use pupils' engagement with revised learning approaches as a diagnostic indicator of the relevance and contribution of updated programme arrangements. Progress in these ways could help avoid physical education becoming 'culturally obsolete' (Kirk,

2010, p. 12) or marginalized further by policy declarations arising from more acute sporting legacy and/or healthy living debates.

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